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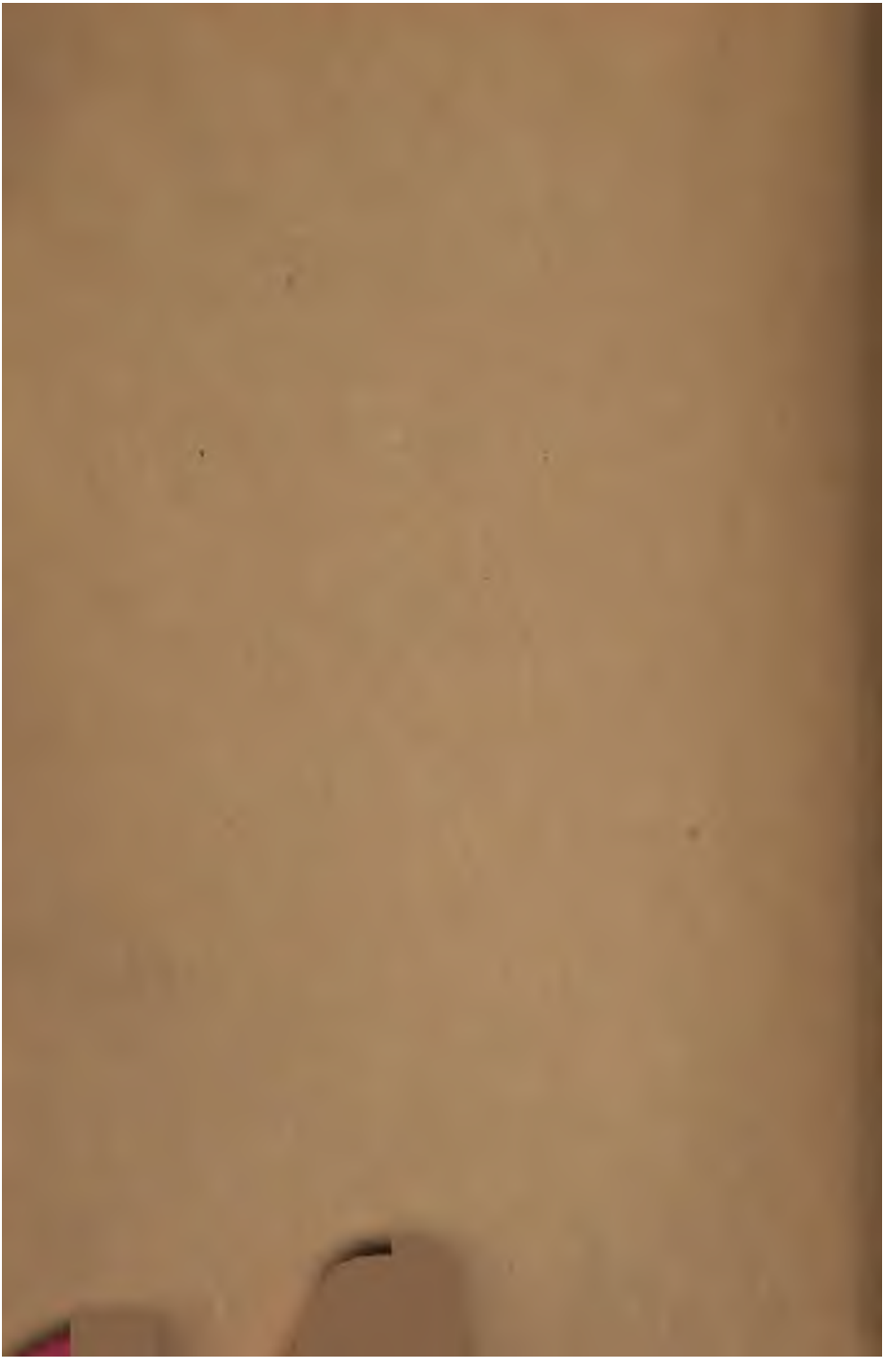

Modern Bible Study and The Christian Life

WILLIAM C. LADD

MODERN BIBLE STUDY

AND

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

BY

WILLIAM C. LADD

Paper read at Friends' Summer School of Religious History, held at Haverford College, Haverford, Pa., Sixth Month, 19th-30th, 1900

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IN no period since they were written have the Scriptures been so carefully studied and critically examined as in the past seventy-five years. The explanation of this fact is to be found chiefly in the scientific spirit which is characteristic of the century now closing. This spirit has led scholars into every possible field of inquiry in their search for truth. It was not to be expected, therefore, that so promising a field as the Bible would escape their notice.

There is much misapprehension as to the class of men at present engaged in this critical study of the Bible. It is probably true that in the earlier years of such study the majority of those engaged in it were rationalistic or semi-rationalistic in their religious opinions. But this is by no means true to-day. Years ago the ineffectiveness of opposing dogmatism to criticism was clearly seen. The only possible course open to evangelical scholars was to take the field against the rationalistic critics and to conquer them "by a more profound and at the same time sympathetic interpretation of the literature, the history and the religion of the Bible." The result has been that to-day the majority of Biblical critics are devout evangelical Christians whose chief desire is to discover the truth.

This fact does not seem to be widely enough known. It should be known, however; for it would be helpful for those who are most disturbed about the new views to realize that they have nothing of the nature of an attack

in them. As Prof. Sanday has said: "They have not come from the Extreme Left or from the destructive party in ecclesiastical politics and theology; but they have come from men of known weight and sobriety of judgment, from men of strong Christian convictions, who, it is felt, would not lightly disturb the same convictions in others, men too of learning who do not speak without knowing what they say."[1]

The results of the investigations of such devout scholars are compelling thoughtful Christians to modify many of their old notions about the Bible. One of the greatest changes has reference to the nature of God's *revelation* of Himself in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

Right here it is well to remind ourselves that Christian criticism such as we are referring to, is distinguished from rationalistic criticism by its unwavering belief in a supernatural revelation. The difference between the new view and the old is simply a difference as to the methods by which that revelation was conveyed.

Christian criticism then reveals the fact that the Old Testament exhibits not merely a progressive development of human thought, but a progressive development of religious ideas—in other words a progressive self-revelation of God.[2]

The reconstruction of the facts of Hebrew history in the light of modern Biblical research makes it clear that the Hebrew people in the earlier stages of their existence differed but little in their moral and religious ideas and practices from the other Semitic peoples. Their first conception of Jehovah represented Him as the God

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1 Sanday's "Oracles of God," page 5.

2 See Ottley's "Aspects of the Old Test." page 165.

merely of their tribe, who hated and desired the destruction of their enemies, and generally possessed many of their own passions. The rise from these crude anthropomorphic ideas[1] to the conception of Jehovah as the God of all mankind and as the God of love—conceptions which so far as appears were first contributed by the Eighth Century Prophets, Amos and Hosea[2]—was slow and tedious, requiring generations of divine education.

As Prof. Kent expresses it, "Not all at once but by a long and painful process were the barbarian nomads developed into a nation with a message and mission to humanity."[3]

One of the great gains of this new view is that it enables us to get at the right standpoint from which to regard the Old Testament record of God's commands, requirements and modes of action, especially in the rudimentary stages of the spiritual development of His chosen people.

It is now possible to appreciate as we could not before, "the infinite wisdom, tenderness and patience of the actual course which redemptive love has pursued."

Prof. Ottley, in his Bampton Lectures for 1897, says on this point, "Historical science professes to trace the process of revelation and its account in the main we can scarcely hesitate to accept. The tribal God becomes the God of a nation and finally the God of the universe.

Each advance in man's moral receptivity renders possible a further disclosure of the divine nature. All that is debased, crude, limited or ethically defective in the earliest Semitic ideas of Deity gradually falls away,

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1 See Piepenbring's "Theology of the Old Test." pp. 25-29, 97.

2 See Cornill's "The Prophets of Israel," pp. 45, 50.

3 Kent's "History of the Hebrew People, p. X.

until in the fulness of time man is enabled to recognize the glory of God, his essential character, his eternal attributes, in the face of Jesus Christ. Thus we find that critical science does after all vindicate for Christ the position which he claims for himself.

He came to crown a long ascent, to fulfil anticipations which his own Spirit had inspired. In the Old Testament the record of the divine preparation for his coming lies before us. It describes the different stages in the progressive manifestation of God; it exhibits the actual and living operation of those divine attributes which are now, as ever, the support and the solace of the individual soul."[1]

This view of the gradualness of God's revelation of Himself to His people of old, is in exact accord with the principle recognized by Jesus, who spake "the word unto them as they were able to hear it."[2] It is precisely the principle which Jesus Himself enunciated and which underlies all the growth of each individual Christian's life, "first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear."[3]

It is most reassuring to us struggling Christians to know that God through all the ages has graciously recognized the limitations of humanity, and that if we freely and lovingly open our hearts and minds to receive each fresh disclosure of the divine nature, He will help us to grow "till," as Paul said, "we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."[4] This is one of the

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1 "Aspects of the Old Test." p. 205.
2 Mk. 4 [33] 3 Mk. 4 [28] 4 Ephes. 4 [13]

great lessons which the critical study of the Old Testament stands ready to teach the devout Christian.

An acceptance of the results of the modern critical study of the Old Testament requires a modification of the traditional views of *inspiration*.

In any consideration of the doctrine of inspiration two things should always be kept in mind.

1. It is a mistake to suppose, as many do, that the word inspiration "has had a standard meaning for Christians all through the ages." Any one who will take the pains to study the history of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures, will find that it has been maintained in various forms and with various definitions of the nature and extent of the divine influence. All Christians have never been united in the acceptance of a uniform interpretation of the doctrine of inspiration. In this connection it would be well to remember that the Scriptures themselves nowhere formulate a definition or state what is involved in the idea of inspiration.

2. There is absolutely no legitimate method of determining what is involved in the idea of inspiration or under what condition it manifests itself, other than a careful examination of the inspired books themselves and an impartial study of the facts presented by them. Such an examination and study on the part of Christian scholars have yielded results at variance with the views of inspiration that have been commonly held, i. e., with those described by the words *verbal*, *plenary* and *mechanical*.

The view is no longer tenable, that the writers of the books of the Bible were merely passive instruments in the hands of God, so that every statement they made, whether moral and religious, or only historical, chronological and scientific, is to be accepted as true and authoritative. On the other hand, the only view of

inspiration possible in the light of recent Biblical criticism, is that usually included under the words *dynamical* and *moral.*

This means, as Bishop Westcott has said, that "the human powers of the divine messenger act according to their natural laws, even when these powers are supernaturally strengthened. Man is not converted into a mere machine, even in the hand of God."[1]

We still believe that the Biblical writers were inspired. But they must be regarded as inspired only to a definite purpose, namely, the moral and spiritual redemption and development of the race. The Bible, then, according to this view, is to be accepted as authoritative only in matters of religious faith and practice.

It is of the utmost importance that Christian believers should not hold to a wrong view of inspiration, and make claims for the Bible which it nowhere makes for itself.

A Christian scholar has said that "nothing has led to more fatal shipwrecks of faith than the acceptance in youth of *à priori* views of what an inspired book must be, which the study of maturer years has demonstrated only too cogently to be untrue to fact."[2] A false view of inspiration and wrong claims, as to the nature of the Bible on the part of Christians, have given to the modern infidel his most effective weapon.

Furthermore, the view of inspiration made necessary by criticism, forces us to a right appreciation of values. Whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, or David all or any of the Psalms traditionally ascribed to him, or Isaiah all of the book now called by his name, are simply questions of fact to be determined by critical examination,

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1 Westcott's "Int. to the Study of the Gospels," p. 14.

2 Driver's "Sermons on the Old Testament," p. 156.

and in no way affect the question of the inspiration and practical value of those parts of Scripture. The only final test of the inspiration and divine character of any part or all of the Bible is the responsive witness of our own souls to its truth. I know it contains divine truth, because it "finds" me, to borrow Coleridge's expressive word; or as Hallam, I think it was, puts it, "It fits into all the folds of my heart."

It is a misapprehension to think that the critical study of the Bible, such as we are considering, is destructive of a belief in its inspiration. One of the foremost of Old Testament critics, Dr. Driver, of Oxford, says, "Criticism in the hands of Christian scholars does not banish or destroy the inspiration of the Old Testament; it *presupposes* it."[1]

We may rest assured that Christian critical scholars believe profoundly in the inspiration of the Bible. In all their investigations they take it for granted. They seek only "to determine the conditions under which it operates and the literary forms through which it manifests itself."

The devout Christian may safely adopt the view of inspiration presented to him by the critical study of the Bible. He will find that it will remove his own difficulties concerning the Old Testament, at the same time that it disposes of the main attacks against it.

It is true that this view shows us that the human element in the Bible is larger than was supposed. But on the other hand instead of obscuring the divine element it makes it stand out all the more clearly. It shows that it is not the Divine alone that has been and is at work for the accomplishment of God's purposes—but the

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1 Driver's "Introduction to the Literature of the Old Test." p. XV.

divine working with the human.[1] And this must be the experience in every individual soul—the divine and human working together to produce true character, i. e., Christ-likeness.

What has been said thus far has had reference to the truer and fuller knowledge of God, and His modes of action that the critical study of the Old Testament has made possible for us.

When we consider that a deepening acquaintance with God is the chief problem of the Christian life, we begin to appreciate, as Christians, how great our debt is to Old Testament criticism.

But it may be asked, "Has our knowledge of *Christ*, who came to reveal God, been increased in like manner by such study?" No one can refer to this subject without quoting from Dr. Fairbairn's already classic book, "The Place of Christ in Modern Theology." He says: "The most distinctive and determinative element in modern theology is what we may term a new feeling for Christ. But we feel Him more in our theology because we know Him better in history. His historical reality and significance have broken upon us with something of the surprise of a discovery, and He has, as it were, become to us a new and more actual being. It is certainly not too much to say, He is to-day more studied and better known as He was and as He lived than at any period between now and the first age of the Church."[1]

"This recovery of the historical Christ and consequent new feeling for Him is due to many causes, mainly to the growth of the historical spirit. This spirit is not new,

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1 See Sanday's "Oracles of God," Chap. V; Kirkpatrick's "Divine Library of the O. T." pp. 90 to 93.

1 p. 3.

though its methods are; but it is more scientific, sympathetic, veracious than of old."[1]

I quote again,—this time from an editorial in the last Christmas number of *The Biblical World*, of which Dr. Harper, President of the University of Chicago, is the editor-in-chief: "Never has the birth of Jesus had such a significance for the Christian thinker and teacher, as to-day. Thanks to two generations of historical criticism the days of uncertainty as to whether there ever was such a person as the Jesus of the Gospels, have passed; the most thoughtful scholarly Christian can now accept the historical basis for faith. Thanks also to the same untiring scholarship, we know more than ever before about the customs, the politics, the religious hopes and teachings of the time in which Jesus lived, and thus more than ever before are we able to appreciate the uniqueness of his character and the depth of his thought. He has become a certainty and he is growing real. That he was the Son of God, that through his life and death God reveals himself to us as in no other way—this is what men feel more deeply and and more confidently than ever before. The very concreteness, if we may use the word, of the presentation of his character now made possible, the undogmatic way in which we now think of him; the precision with which we can distinguish his thought from that of even the greatest of the apostles—all these things, the gift of critical scholarship, make us appreciate him more and *love* him more."

These two opinions, representative of the evangelical scholarship of England and America, will show the devout Christian how much he owes to the recent critical

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1 p. 4.

study of the New Testament and its historic setting.

Christ a more living reality—a fuller, truer knowledge of His character and teaching! How much all this should, may mean to the Christian life! Does each one of us "appreciate Christ more and love Him more" today than ever before? If not, Christian scholarship invites us to this experience.

The fear is very general among a large body of Christians that the critical study of the Bible must draw attention away from the work of the Spirit as the great Enlightener and thus is sure to be destructive of the spiritual life. I once shared in this fear. But a fuller acquaintance with the character and work of the leading critical scholars has convinced me that the legitimate and logical result of the new Bible study is the exaltation of the *Holy Spirit.*

In the first place it will be helpful to see what the point of view of some of the leading critics is in this matter.

The latest book of a general nature to present the results of the recent critical investigation of the Bible is "A Biblical Introduction," by Professors Bennett and Adeney, of London. I give the closing sentence of their Preface:

"The authors of this volume trust that it may help its readers to a truer understanding of the Scriptures, and to a fuller appreciation of their unique importance, and may confirm them in the evangelical recognition of the supreme authority of the Bible as interpreted by the Holy Spirit for the spiritual life."

Prof. Cheyne, of Oxford, perhaps the most prominent and in many respects the most radical of English-speaking critics of the Old Testament, says in his book entitled, "Aids to the Devout Study of Criticism:"

"Christ alone by His Spirit can open to us the Scriptures, but criticism can help to prepare our minds to receive the Spirit's message by giving us a correct historical view of the Bible."[1]

I quote next from Dr. Briggs, of New York, whose trial and consequent retirement from the Presbyterian Church did much to call attention to and arouse interest in the new Bible study. In his book called "The Study of Holy Scripture," he says: "It is necessary to know God and His Christ in order to know the Bible. The Scriptures can not be understood from outside by grammar, logic, rhetoric and history alone. The Bible is to be understood from its centre—its heart—its Christ. * * * Through the avenues of the Scriptures we go to find Christ—in their centre we find our Saviour. It is this personal relation of the author of the entire Scriptures to the interpreter that enables him truly to understand the divine things of Scripture."[2]

And again: "The doctrine that the Holy Spirit is the supreme interpreter of Scripture is the highest attainment of interpretation."[3]

Let me repeat two or three expressions from these quotations:

"Christ alone by His Spirit can open to us the Scripture." "It is necessary to know God and His Christ in order to understand the Bible." "* * the Holy Spirit the supreme interpreter of Scripture." No body of Friends in the world would hesitate to incorporate these expressions in their declarations of faith, and yet they express the earnest convictions of men who have been called enemies of the faith.

These quotations will perhaps suffice to show that

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1 p. 141. 2 p. 363. 3 p 365.

Christian criticism recognizes the Holy Spirit as the supreme interpreter of Scripture, and will help us to realize that critical scholars do their work in the belief that it will not only not hinder but aid spiritual life.

A distinguished minister of the Gospel once testified in our hearing that not till the new views of the Bible had removed certain difficulties in his mind had he become conscious in his own experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Hastings, editor of "The Expository Times," and "Hastings' Bible Dictionary," has recently said: "As criticism is simply the search after truth, I do not see how it can hinder a man's spirituality. I am convinced that as a movement it will help, not hinder. In this country (England), at least, some of the most spiritual men are its advocates—Sanday, Driver, Gore, Davidson, Whyte, etc."

I have said that the legitimate and logical result of the critical study of the Bible is the exhaltation of the Holy Spirit. One of the main grounds for this belief is the fact that criticism above all else sifts the essential from the non-essential. It shows us, for example, that the authorship, date and literary form of special parts of Scripture—things about which scholars are apt to disagree —are wholly unessential to faith. The one thing that stands out as essential—upon which all Christian scholars are agreed—is, that the Bible contains the divinely inspired record of God's revelation of Himself and His purpose of redemptive love, through Israel to the world.

Biblical criticism reveals faults in grammar, rhetoric and logic, errors in science, chronology and historical statement; but it also shows us that these faults and "errors are all," as has been repeatedly pointed out, "in the circumstantials and not in the essentials, they

are in the human setting, not in the precious jewel itself."

Our eyes are opened now to see that our faith does not stand or fall with these things.

It is true that "nothing so helps us to distinguish between the body and soul of religion as historical study." Under its exact and searching methods of inquiry, the inner significance of religion as distinguished from all externalities, is becoming more and more apparent. The result of all this is that those under the influence of the new Bible study are placing less emphasis on rites and ceremonies and more on the spiritual essence of religion. This leads those who are able to read the signs of the times to rejoice in the belief that the time is not far distant when—thanks to the work of Christian criticism—the religious world will come to recognize the Person and work of the Spirit to a vastly greater degree than heretofore, and will thus be led into a spiritual experience that will express itself in an ardent passion for the regeneration of mankind.

That this is not a vain dream there are already evidences.

Take, for example, the case of Dr. Hillis, of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn. I quote from his recent letter[1] of withdrawal from the Presbyterian denomination:

"So far also from loving the Christian Church, and the Christian ministry less, these views have strengthened my love until it has become an all-consuming passion. There are hours when I look out upon the multitudes going stumbling, blundering, weeping, falling, sinning, dying, when it seems to me I would die a thousand deaths to be permitted to give a cup of cold

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1 Dated March 29th, 1900.

water only to Christ's little ones, or light one beacon fire to guide the pilgrim host out of the desert. And when I think of the poor in our tenement houses, of the prodigal sons and daughters in the streets of our great cities, upon men whose business it is to degrade their fellows, I feel what I had once hoped might be done for my fellows through schemes of social reform and philanthropy, can only be done by the influence of Jesus Christ and His Spirit manifested in His disciples."

I have been much impressed during the past few months with the feeling that, when the new views of the Bible become generally assimilated by Christian believers, there will be a great revival of the evangelizing spirit.

The following paragraph from a recently published letter[1] of Prof. McGiffert, of N. Y., is most suggestive:

"I believe that the time will yet come when the all too prevalent misunderstanding of the spirit and purpose of the many Christian scholars who are trying to contribute in their several spheres to the advance of the kingdom of God shall everywhere give way to sympathy and mutual co-operation, and when the alarm now so commonly occasioned by the publication of unfamiliar views shall disappear altogether under the influence of a stronger and more widespread faith in the truth of God and in the guiding influence of His Spirit. Only a faith so profound as to cast out all fear can give to the Church in this age that spiritual enthusiasm and power through which alone it can take the world for Christ."

That these new views should cause disquietude in the minds of many Christian believers is not surprising. As a Biblical critic has said, "It would argue indifference

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1 Letter of withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church, dated April 9th, 1900.

rather than enlightenment, if the great mass of Bible readers, to whom scientific points of view for the study of the Scripture are wholly unfamiliar, could adjust themselves to a new line of investigation into the history of the Bible, without passing through a crisis of anxious thought, not far removed from distress and alarm."[1]

It ought to be reassuring to all such to know that the number of those whose faith has been and is being permanently established by the results of critical scholarship is larger than that of those whose faith has been seriously unsettled by them.

As a matter of fact, a very large number of persons had reached a point where they had either lost or were losing their faith because of difficulties in connection with the Bible, which the traditional views had created but were powerless to remove. J. Patterson Smyth quotes in his book, "How God Inspired the Bible," a letter from a young student in which the following sentences occur: "There are hundreds * * * like me, who do not want to lose their grasp on the Bible; but we can no longer view it as we have been taught to do. If there is any way by which one can still hold it and treasure it, do our teachers know it? and, if they do, why do they not tell us?" This class is much larger than is supposed. Some of us have known of such in our own Society. To all these the new Bible study has come as a veritable evangel. It has called many who were drifting into agnosticism and unbelief, as we have heard one of them say, "back to the loving fold of Christ."

It would also be helpful to those who are disturbed as to the effect of the new views, to remember that they

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1 W. Robertson Smith's "Old Test. in the Jewish Church," pp. 1, 2.

have now been for a number of years tested in the actual experiences of thousands of individuals. In a very true sense they can no longer be called experimental.

I have recently received suggestive letters from Professors Sanders and Kent,[1] who are doing so much by pen and word of mouth to present in a reverent but scholarly manner the results of Biblical criticism to students and to the general reading public.

Prof. Kent says: "Within the past five years I have come into close contact with several thousand students within and without the University class room, and I have not met with or heard of a single man whose faith has been impaired by the faithful application of true scientific methods to the study of the Bible. On the other hand, I have had hundreds say that their interest in and understanding of the Bible first began when they began to study it in the sensible manner indicated by modern teachers. To them its beauty and message came as a new revelation. * * * * While in its first stages modern Bible study seemed to destroy, it was only to lay the foundations for faith far deeper and surer. To the one just entering this field, it is a surprise to find that none of the essentials to faith are shaken. * * * It has been one of the best rewards of my university work to have students come to me each term and say that their personal religious life had been deepened and broadened by the critical work of the class room, and that having been greatly helped themselves, they were eager to go out and lead others to the same results. As a matter of fact, the

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1 Dr. Sanders is Professor of Biblical Literature in Yale University, and Dr. Kent holds a similar position in Brown Unversity. They are editing two helpful series of books called "The Messages of the Bible," and "The Historical Series for Bible Students."

question, whether or not scientific Bible study aids spiritual life, has already been answered by experience, and the present question is: How can the great body of earnest Bible students be most effectively introduced to its methods and results? The answer to this question is, in the highest degree, vital to the present and future of Christianity. If rightly answered the Christian Church is destined to enter upon a new and far more effective epoch in its history."

Prof. Sanders bears substantially the same testimony as to the effect of the new views on his students. He makes an interesting statement with regard to his own personal experience. "In my own case," he writes, "the historical and literary study of the Bible has steadily contributed to the enrichment and deepening of my own religious life and to the strength of my religious experience."

The best argument for Christianity is a Christian life. The best argument for the new views of the Bible is the testimony of devout Christians that they help to strengthen the Christian life. Now in view of all these things I feel that it is hardly an exaggeratian to say that Biblical "criticism is one of the best gifts of God to this generation."

I fully believe that the time is not remote when there will be a general recognition on the part of Christian believers of the truth of what was said by the late W. Robertson Smith, who was called "the most brilliant critic of the English-speaking countries." I quote from his fascinating book, "The Old Testament in the Jewish Church:"[1]

"There is no discordance between the religious and

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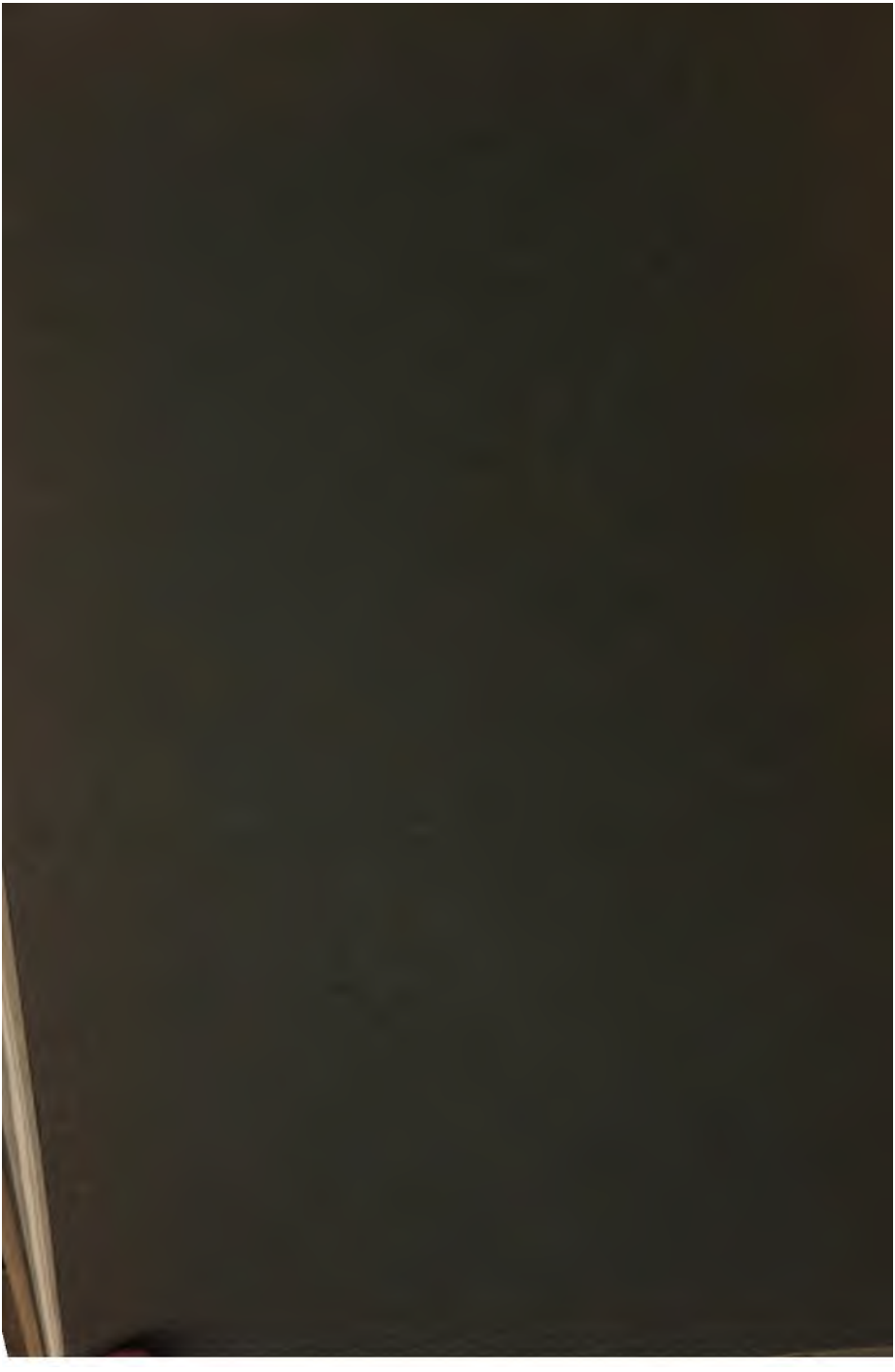
1 p. 18.

scholarly methods of study. They lead to the same goal; and the more closely our study fulfills the demands of historical scholarship, the more fully will it correspond with our religious needs."

Let me earnestly urge, in closing, that in all our search after truth according to the best methods presented to us by Biblical criticism, we should ever bear in mind the wise counsel of a critical scholar: "And above all, do not forget another kind of work more fundamentally necessary—that of personal appropriation of known spiritual truth. Live near to God and every kind of knowledge will help you, even in your religious life; forget Him and there are no intellectual gains that will compensate you for this supreme mistake."[1]

1 Cheyne's "Aids to the Devout Study of Criticism," p. 73.



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